

## **You have to when you can**

**By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2003**

This tale is a variation on a theme — “You have to when you can.”

We spent a long weekend this January in New Orleans. We’d been looking forward to the trip since we planned it last August. We were to meet my brother and his family there to celebrate my niece’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Whatever could go wrong did.

First, my daughter Anna and I almost nearly missed the plane. While Mike was parking our car in a lot and taking a shuttle back to the airport, Anna and I bumped into Menomonee Falls friend Ellen Kauth at the food court. We got talking... and talking... and didn’t notice the time until *five minutes before take-off*. Poor Mike was caught by security on the plane and didn’t know what happened to us.

Later, on the plane, Mike became nauseated and broke into a cold sweat. I thought we had given him a heart attack by our lateness and my guilt was full-flowered. The flight attendant and I nursed him all the way to New Orleans.

At the hotel, it was on to the Land of Nod for Mike and to Mardi Gras World for Anna and me. Later, when my brother’s family arrived, Mike felt a little better — off and on.

That evening, in spite of Mike’s weakened condition, he walked the mile or so to Mulate’s Cajun restaurant near the river. The band was sawing away at some rockin’ Cajun French tunes and folks were dancing on the big wood floor. While I ate gator, Mike nibbled a salad — all he had the courage to eat.

It wasn’t long before a man approached our table and asked if anyone would like to dance. Everyone at our table pointed to me, and I popped right up —

— And danced with a man who was at least 90 years old, and I promise you I’m not exaggerating. He was a great leader and master of economy of (his) movement. In Cajun dancing, as in many other forms of dancing, the art is in the man leading the woman through complicated twists and turns. He doesn’t have to move much, but he’s doing all the thinking. She just has to follow and let her skirts swirl.

And so it was. “Grand-pepere” swirled me around the floor in a great Cajun two-step. When the song changed, he asked, “Want to do a jitterbug?” I said, “Sure!” and he led me again, in a Cajun version.

After that, a younger man asked me to dance. He was probably in his early 70s. He was a marvelous dancer and super leader. He spun me in even more twists and turns, creating little “windows” of our arms through which we could peek at each other.

I returned sweating to the table.

My sister-in-law said, “You probably made that guy’s night.”

I said, “No, he made my night -- he’s a better dancer than Mike.”

Not long after that, Mike rallied and we danced until we were tired, then walked back to the hotel.

As the weekend progressed, the weather dipped to almost freezing. I hadn’t brought my winter coat, so I dressed in layers and resembled a person who lives under an overpass. After walking all day Sunday, my feet felt like two blocks of ice, like when I jumped into Lake Michigan with the Polar Bears. Back at the hotel, I ran hot water in the bathtub and soaked until I could feel them again.

In spite of the cold, in spite of his flu symptoms, Mike continued to fight valiantly to have a good time. He eventually graduated from salads to beans and rice, and even participated in a Cajun cooking class where we ate chicken file gumbo and pecan pie.

And so it went.... Those old men at Mulate’s kept dancing.... We kept walking through the cold.... Mike kept partying through his illness, between naps....

You have to when you can.

The End

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